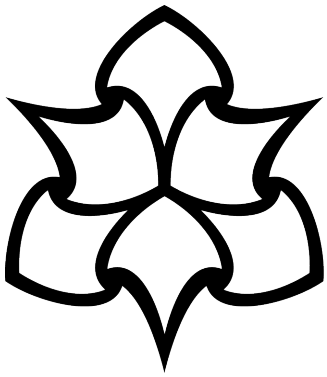

Fair Chances and Hard Work?

Families making sense of inequality and opportunity in 21st Century Britain

Abstract

In British social mobility discourse, the rhetoric of fair access can obscure wider issues of social justice. While socio-economic inequalities continue to shape young people's lives, sociological work on class dis-identification suggests social class is less obviously meaningful as a source of individual and collective identity. This paper considers subjective understandings of the post-16 education and employment landscape in this context, drawing on qualitative research exploring the aspirations of young men and women as they completed compulsory education in North West England, and the hopes their parents had for their future. It shows how unequal access to resources shaped the older generation's expectations for their children, although this was rarely articulated using the explicit language of class. Their children recognized they faced a difficult job market but embraced the idea that success was possible through hard work. Both generations drew moral boundaries and made judgments based on implicit classed discourses about undeserving others, while at the same time disavowing class identities. There was a more explicit recognition of gender inequality among the parents framed with reference to hopes for greater freedom for their daughters. Opportunities and inequalities were thus understood in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Keywords: class, subjective inequalities, gender, youth transitions

Fair Chances and Hard Work?

Families making sense of inequality and opportunity in 21st Century Britain [i]

Introduction

In contemporary Britain, education is seen as the key institutional pathway to upward social mobility. Over the past twenty years, the New Labour governments (1997-2010), the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015) and now the Conservatives have all focused policy attention on improving educational outcomes through providing equality of opportunity. At the time of writing, Prime Minister Theresa May had just unveiled Conservative educational reforms centred on the idea of the UK as a 'great meritocracy':

> …. a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow… I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter. (May 2016).

In this context of 'fair chances and hard work' that enables young people to succeed according to their talent, this paper asks: what ideas do young people coming to the end of compulsory education have about what is fair and unfair? How do these compare to their parents' views? What is the role of social class (if any) in their understandings of opportunities for and the fairness of social mobility? Subjectivities of class present a paradox in twenty-first century Britain, in which people generally object to class as a category because they believe in the principle of meritocracy, yet often implicitly feel and express class boundaries and identities (Savage et al. 2015). This paper brings together two related areas of interest to explore subjective understandings of the post-16 education and employment landscape: sociological concerns with the apparent decline in class identities; and policy / public concerns with the apparent decline in social mobility.

In order to conceptualise these subjectivities, we draw on the idea of a 'social imaginary' (Angus, 2015; Ball, 2012; Rivzi and Lingard 2013; Taylor 2004). This concept aims to encapsulate a 'way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common

understandings that make everyday life possible, giving them sense and legitimacy' (Rivzi and Lingard 2010: 34). We start by reviewing current debates on social mobility and class identities and note the context of a *neoliberal* social imaginary, where educational policy is shaped by the dominance of market logic (Ball 2012; Rivzi and Lingard 2010). We then introduce the location of our study, the sample of young people and their parents, and the qualitative interviews which form the basis of our data. The paper then considers four major themes that emerged from our analysis. Firstly, we explore how our sample talked about class, with claims to ordinariness and a disavowal of positive class identities. Secondly, we discuss how our sample drew implicit classed boundaries around issues of culture and morality (including ideas of a 'benefits culture', 'bad parenting' and 'chavs'). Thirdly, we suggest our data demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of trying to articulate a competitive educational and employment market using the language of the neoliberal social imaginary. Fourthly, we also explore gender inequalities and how social mobility is premised upon delayed motherhood and 'getting away'. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of considering class dis-identification when exploring how young people and their parents talk about education-employment transitions, generational differences, and how these are articulated looking to the past, present and future.

Social mobility, 'fairness', and class identities

The families in our study were reflecting on inequality and opportunity in a context where a particular social mobility discourse has become dominant (Payne 2017). Consecutive British governments in the 21st Century have focused on social mobility as a tool to tackle inequality, promoting the idea that young people being able to 'move up' occupational classes is a fundamental principle of a 'fair society': 'fairness is about social mobility – the degree to which the patterns of advantage and disadvantage in one generation are passed onto the next' (Cabinet Office 2011: 11). This understanding of fairness is part of the contemporary 'social imaginary', a concept developed by Taylor (2004) to describe the largely implicit ways of thinking about the world that are embedded in both everyday social practice and wider ideologies. Rivzi and Lingard (2010) argue global education has been

shaped by a dominant *neoliberal* social imaginary. This 'promotes markets over the state and regulation and individual advancement/self-interest over the collective good and common well being' (Lingard 2009, cited in Ball 2012: 2). The Prime Minister's 'great meritocracy' speech (May 2016) is grounded in the neoliberal social imaginary in which success – defined as social mobility – is possible for individuals if there is equality of opportunity rooted in choice and competition. From this position, inequalities are no longer a problem if anyone can succeed, but this neglects ongoing evidence that those who start the competition from a more advantaged position and who have more resources to draw upon have a much better chance of winning the game (Savage et al. 2015).

Such class advantages have remained remarkably consistent over time. Overall, relative occupational class mobility in the UK – the respective chances of people born in different classes ending up in one class rather than another as an adult – has been fairly constant, even during the 'Golden Age' of the post-war 20th Century, when structural change meant there was more 'room at the top' (Goldthorpe 2016). The total absolute mobility rate – the extent of mobility or immobility within the population - has also been stable (Goldthorpe 2016; Payne 2017). What has changed in more recent years is that upward absolute mobility rates are decreasing and downward absolute mobility rates are increasing, a reversal of previous trends, which puts more people born into advantaged positions 'at risk' from mobility (Goldthorpe 2016). Such nuances in sociological research on social mobility are missing from the dominant policy rhetoric. Not 'everyone can be winners' in a meritocratic system yet this is overlooked in such political discourse (Payne 2017).

Our interest in these debates concerns the extent to which the dominant framework of understanding – the neoliberal imaginary – is evident in how different generations make sense of the educational and employment opportunities available to young people at a transitional moment in their lives. While we might expect younger generations to be more progressive in their orientations, we also need to consider the prevailing values when people 'come of age'. Research from political science suggests that neoliberalism became

normalised rather than challenged during the New Labour years in the UK so that political attitudes of younger people shifted even further to the right of those of 'Thatcher's Children' (Grasso et al. 2017), which now may be fully entrenched. In addition, we consider the extent to which ideas about fairness draw solely on an individualised framing, or whether social class identification has any relevance for the families' perspectives on young people's trajectories.

Since the 1990s, sociologists have been concerned with the apparent decline in overt class identification, despite persistent inequalities (Savage 2000). This has led to proclamations that class is a 'zombie category' (Beck 1992); informing a debate which is well rehearsed in youth sociology (Threadgold 2011). In this paper, we draw on perspectives from 'cultural class analysis' on dis-identification (Skeggs 1997) and concerns with 'ordinariness' (Devine 1992; Savage et al. 2001). Such perspectives address how subjective understandings of inequality are framed through individualised hierarchies, where class disappears as an explicit reference point (Bottero 2004). One implication for youth in particular is what Furlong and Cartmel (2007) call the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity', in which young people look to individual explanations for their paths in life, and consequently take responsibility for them, even when structural forces remain determining factors in what shape these paths take. Recent evaluations of this concept argue that there is a reflexive, implicit acknowledgement of class in young people's narratives (France and Haddon 2014) or that they may have a belief in their own agency while also remaining ambivalent to these individualised explanations (Farthing 2016). In previous work, Devine (2004) suggests that a fruitful point of exploration is the contexts in which class is articulated, and when it is not, in order to understand its salience. Of concern here is if and when class comes into frame when young people and their parents make sense of educational and employment opportunities. In this way, we contribute to sociological knowledge on the discourse of meritocracy as a reference point for everyday talk about fairness and if there are generational differences in how this discourse is articulated. We find parallels with more

general debates surrounding simultaneous disavowal of class and the ongoing power of classed subjectivities (Savage et al. 2015).

Method

The data presented here is drawn from a research project conducted in 'Heathside', a town located within a metropolitan local authority in the North of England. The local authority had a population of 220,000 at the 2011 Census, with a mixture of urban and semi-rural areas. Heathside is a traditional working class locality with a manufacturing past, although like many industrial towns in the North, work in this sector has declined. Employment, where it is available, is in lower-level service work and food factories. The working class population is larger than the national average and the area is 91% White[ii]. At the time of the research in 2010, unemployment was 8.3% compared to the national rate of 7.7%, and the proportion of workless households was 22.5% compared to 18.9% of the national population.

The study focused on young people's choices and decisions for their next steps at 16 years old, which, at the time of the research, was the end of compulsory schooling. All of our young people were 15-16, White, and in their final year (Year 11) at the same high school, 'Ashley'. Ashley was a new community school that was funded by the local authority but had been built by a private finance initiative to replace a failing school nearby. Examination results were improving but average, although the school was rated as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted. There was a sense of pride among our interviewees over the state of the art facilities, and that the new school offered a fresh start and a new potential for success. Our contact teacher was keen to stress that the school culture placed a great deal of emphasis on being enterprising, working hard and taking personal responsibility to avoid the ranks of the local unemployed. The interviews were therefore taking place within an institutional context that suggested the prevalence of the neoliberal imaginary.

The sample we draw on here is a subgroup of the wider research, consisting of 8 young men and 8 young women. We characterise their post-16 pathways as: Traditional A-Levels, 'New' A-Levels, and Vocational/Other[iii] (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted in 2010 with these young people at school or at home, and with at least one of their parents or guardians. 19 parents in total were interviewed: 14 mothers, 1 female carer and 4 fathers . All had grown up in or around Heathside, or in the wider metropolitan area. The majority of the parents had working class origins, with some benefiting from a degree of upward mobility over the course of their working lives (see Table 2). Given the profile of Heathside, we found more variation in the class composition of the sample than we expected. These details were woven into their life stories, and represent our reading of their narratives rather than systematic data. The parents' trajectories also highlight the complexities of class categorisation. For these reasons, we have exercised caution in our analysis of differences between class fractions.

TABLE 1 HERE

TABLE 2 HERE

The interviews focused on the next steps the young people were hoping to take after their GCSEs, which they were due to sit in the summer of 2010. They were asked questions about their experiences of school, which college they hoped to attend, what courses they wanted to take, and their aspirations for the future. Their parents were asked about their backgrounds, their own educational and employment experiences, and what they hoped for their children. Both generations were also asked to consider issues of equality/inequality, education and employment opportunities, and whether social class shaped people's lives. Our colleague Mikaela Luttrell-Rowland (2016) analysed this data to explore young people's understandings of inequality in which they emphasise hard work and self-determination as the driver of social mobility. We expand upon these findings to consider the perspectives of parents along with the young people themselves, and place these in the context of sociological critiques of the meritocratic discourse and the implications for the

contemporary politics of class. Given the debates surrounding the decline of class identification as discussed above, we were particularly interested in whether the two generations spoke about class differences, and how: explicitly or implicitly, prompted or unprompted.

Class and class identities

As Table 2 shows, some of the parents had grown up in families that were better off than others. Yet across their narratives, similar ideas cropped up describing their childhood: being comfortable (rather than wealthy or poor), average, and ordinary. Aileen's parents were a painter and decorator and home-help. She describes their standard of living with reference to hard work and respectability:

> Erm it was comfortable. Me mum and dad worked hard. They worked really hard for what we had. You know we never did without, but they worked really hard … I mean - you know sometimes they must have been absolutely shattered when they came in, you know, and then me mum'd have to start cooking and she wouldn't just make us beans on toast, we'd have a proper dinner. And the table was always set nice, you know, a tablecloth on and she always did it properly (Aileen, carer).

Sociological work on class identification has noted how individuals wish to highlight their 'ordinariness' (Devine 1992; Savage et al. 2001). It also indicates the continued salience of the idea of respectability and hard work – like Aileen's mother's standards – as a way to avoid being seen as part of the 'rough' working classes (Skeggs 1997). We see these descriptions of background as contributing to the evidence for the disavowal of class identities. (Savage, Silva and Warde 2010). None of the parents described growing up in an ordinary *working-class* family. Class did not play an explicit role in their understanding of where they had come from. Consequently, we might wonder whether class plays any kind of role in their understanding of their present or future, and particularly where their children might be heading.

This was a complex and contradictory issue. When asked if class 'matters', 4 out of 5 of our middle class parents agreed, reflecting upon economic advantages, such as those that might be helpful in education, alongside the importance of social networks: 'it's not what you know but who you know'[iv]. The picture among our intermediate and working class parents was more mixed, with half agreeing and the other disagreeing. Those who thought class mattered referred to inequalities of power and political weight, and spoke of the 'haves and have-nots' in abstract terms. Alongside this discussion of unevenly distributed resources was a renunciation of the *idea* of class. Two of our working class mothers rejected class on a personal level. Hannah simultaneously recognised the power of economic capital – 'money talks' – but also suggested that accepting class advantage would suggest the middle classes were 'better':

> *Interviewer*: Some people say that if you were from a working class family you'll have different chances than if you were from a rich family.
>
> *Hannah*: Yeah well that's a load of rubbish is that.
>
> *Interviewer*: Really?
>
> *Hannah*: Well I think it is yeah. I really do. It's not fair that.
>
> *Interviewer*: But do you think that's true or not?
>
> *Hannah*: Um money talks. No I don't think that's true no. I think working class can do just as good – as good as any class and you know middle class, working class whatever (Hannah, Carer).

Hannah rejected class as it would validate classed hierarchies (Savage et al. 2015).

In contrast, class was much more ambivalent in young people's narratives, with inequalities described in individualised terms. Two of our middle class children and three of our intermediate class children recognised class inequality but this was in terms of individualised class judgements, of 'people looking down on you' (Emily, Traditional A Levels). Holly considered how this might be a problem when looking for a job.

Holly: Yes, I think it could sometimes like they'd give it to, they'd give a job to like a middle-class person more than a lower-class one, because like they might be a bit scruffy or whatever.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Holly: Well, that's wrong, because, like the scruffier person might have qualifications that the middle-class person doesn't have (Holly, vocational).

Conversely, the other young people either misunderstood the question (and thought the interviewer was talking about classes at schools) or broadly agreed with meritocratic principles. *Success* was down to individual hard work. When asked whether she thought class 'matters', Amanda responded:

> Erm, it depends how hard you work as an individual… Because if you don't try at all to get your GCSEs then you're not gonna be able to get the job you want. (Amanda, 'New' A Levels)

Mendick, Allen and Harvey (2015) suggest young people are growing up in a 'hard work zeitgeist', an imaginary of meritocracy, in which structural constraints can be overcome to achieve success regardless of background. Although the young people acknowledged inequality, there was not the same consideration of collective inequalities based on resources as evidenced in their parents' accounts. Nor was the respectability of hard work claimed as a particular ordinary identity as in their parents' narratives, but instead was a way of marking out who deserved to do well.

Discussions across the interviews suggested that the young people thought class location was a reflection of the individuals concerned: 'it shows you as a person'; 'people are just the way they are'. Through the prism of meritocracy, structural inequalities are refracted as evidence of personal attributes. Yet these young people were fully aware of the stigma attached to particular positions without claiming a class identity of their own. Class labels were something to be avoided, especially that of the 'chav', characterised by deviant behaviour and coded by their tasteless clothing and style[v]. As we discuss in the following

section, the way that class was drawn on as a category was on the basis of individualised – and moralised – value judgements (Savage et al 2015; Skeggs 1997).

Despite this, there were two young people, and two parents, who made spontaneous references to class difference. In considering the context of when class is articulated (Devine 2004), the young people's references seemed to come from situations of a sudden awareness of difference. Tony, whose divorced mother was a postal delivery worker, had a complicated class background, describing his grandparents as well off but was now living in reduced circumstances. Unprompted, Tony declared he was 'upper class and rich'. Conversely, Amanda rejected a local sixth-form college due to her discomfort at feeling out of place when visiting because the students were 'upper class'. One of the fathers, Noel, also spontaneously referred to class difference. He was a teaching assistant who (unusually) had spent considerable time as a stay-at-home dad and the rest of his working life doing odd jobs. He was the only parent to reluctantly describe his background with an explicit reference to class: 'I suppose you'd have to call it like middle-class'. His own parents – a teacher and office manager – could afford to send him to a local grammar school as a paying pupil. Noel hated his school days and left as soon as possible. He viewed the majority of his schoolmates from 'upper-class families, wealthy families' who looked down on him. His father, a teacher who was 'all for school for schools and everything' but Noel did not feel comfortably part of this world:

> I tended to hang around with the ones who didn't sort of fit in er – theirs was the same as mine to a degree where they didn't like it, and when I was 14 I made me mind up that I was leaving school when I was 16, as soon as I could (Noel, teaching assistant).

Another father, Adrian, explicitly referred to class in relation to exploitation and conflict, rather than based on cultural difference or feeling out of place. Discussing what he'd like to say to the current Prime Minister, he said:

> I think he [the Prime Minister] wants to listen to the lower classes more. Instead of the upper class […] They are the upper crust, they don't have the same problems as us. We've got to – we've got a fight from the beginning, they don't; they're already three quarters up the ladder (Adrian, painter & decorator)

Following Bourdieu, we could suggest that for some participants like Tony, Amanda and Noel, it was at points of disjuncture – feeling out of place, a 'fish out of water' – that class may come to the fore as a reference point (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Yet in Adrian's case, it was difficult to see – beyond being in the reflexive space of an interview – where this 'class consciousness' had arisen in a particular moment in time. Indeed, discussing his biography and that of his family, it seemed more likely that this was the outcome of a lifetime of just about getting by as a self-employed painter and decorator. In over 30 interviews, his was the only specific reference to class politics. None of our families discussed trade union membership, for example, despite the town's industrial past. Adrian was articulating inequality with reference to class positions that the other parents had acknowledged implicitly, yet struggled to articulate using the contemporary discourses available (Luttrell-Rowland 2016). In contrast, participants were much more likely to discuss what they perceived to be unfair in terms of preferential treatment of an undeserving underclass.

Culture and morality: unfairness in contemporary Britain

The idea that there is an 'underclass' in British society has continued to hold traction in both popular and political understandings of the causes of poverty. Class is divorced from structural context, and instead a product of deviant lifestyles and poor choices (Tyler 2013). In our sample, both generations were concerned about the perceived advantages of and attention bestowed on disengaged or 'troubled' young people. These were class-laden value judgements, but predicated on issues of morality and individual or family pathologies so that class disappears from view. It was *unfair* that resources are directed at these products of an 'underclass', as they are undeserving. A 'benefits culture' was referred to by three of

our mothers. One middle class mother, Lois, reflected that those 'on benefits' were better off than those in work:

> They let them just sit … I'm not gonna say without sounding really awful, people who – who are on benefits, do sit down and just think it's easy just to take the benefits and … believe me, it is sometimes easier. I know because I know people who are on benefits who go out to work and are actually worse off (Lois, Housing Officer).

These sentiments were not limited to the more advantaged parents, however. Aileen, one of our working class mothers, agreed with Lois, stating that such families were better off than her hard-working family.

Of particular relevance to these families was the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). At the time of the interviews (2010) this incentive of up to £30 per week for young people from low-income families to stay in full-time education post-16 was still in place, although was abolished in England shortly afterwards. Both June and Sarah's children were not eligible due to their household income exceeding the threshold, and they saw this scheme as *unfair*:

> Lucy will get no help, obviously because of mine and [her husband's] salary but I think it's really unfair. Because she will attend every lesson every week, why should she be penalised? (June, Accounts Supervisor)

The stigma associated with benefits provides a suggestion as to why the parents identified their backgrounds as ordinary, rather than working class. In the contemporary neoliberal social imaginary, both the deserving poor and the respectable working class disappear and only the undeserving 'underclass' remain. Poverty has become a 'lack of respectability and inability to manage, a moral failure worthy of blame' (Shildrick and Macdonald 2013: 293). June's feelings rest upon this principle, because rather than seeing those on low incomes requiring help, they are in such positions through their own moral failings.

Reflecting on what is fair and unfair prompted discussions of individual morality rather than the unequal distribution of resources. Heather, a primary school teacher, thought

'everyone's got the same chance… but some people can't be bothered.' One evocative way this was expressed was through views on immoral parenting. For Gillies (2005), policy discourse shifted under the New Labour government to focus on 'bad parenting' as the source of social problems, with a 'moral majority' scrutinising the childrearing practices and values of the 'socially excluded'. We can see parallels in the parents' views on those who were seen to have a negative effect on their children's education, either directly through being disruptive or taking an *unfair* share of resources.

For four of our mothers in particular, immoral sexual behaviour, bad parenting and benefits culture were linked, and they distanced themselves from such behaviour. Hannah, a cleaner, had her first child at 28 and spoke disparagingly of 'teenage pregnancies', whereas Deidre, a nurse, had her first child at 17 then divorced – but still judged young women getting pregnant 'on purpose' to gain benefits. She positioned herself as different to such young women as she was a hard worker and trained as nurse. Sarah, a childminder, referred to 'disadvantaged children whose parents don't care' as a concern, with problem families as the cause of disadvantage and inequality. Lack of achievement in education was linked to these immoral cultures:

> Well they should be taken out. It's a privilege to be taught things. It's not, you know, it's – they think it's they have to do it. It's a waste of time and they blame the fact they've got split parents and er things like that. When we first sent [eldest child] to school, that was not common, but it's – very… common, split families… And [parents] having three children with different fathers or mothers in school… (Julie, full-time parent)

The impact of single and/or teenage mothers and 'broken homes' on standards of behaviour locates inequality in the reproducing pathological cultures of the 'underclass' as understood by Murray (1990). As well as not participating in economic relations through work, the underclass are viewed by Murray as making a 'choice to break with long-established norms about one's role in… *the relations of social reproduction* (one needs and ought to marry and raise properly disciplined and socialized children)' (Hayward and Yar 2006: 12).

The young people in our sample also made moral distinctions between themselves and others using classed language, but unlike their parents they used different negative labels, such as 'chav'. One young man, Connor, was living in care, although he was in touch with his mother who was currently out of work. He colourfully described what chavs were like:

> Like if you get chavs like some people say, 'oh they'll never get an education. They'll just grow up being horrible, dirty, smack-heads or druggies' but they can't just 'cause they're like chavs. I don't like chavs but I don't hate 'em. Everyone's like, can get a good education (Connor, Vocational).

As someone who had faced considerable challenges in his life so far, Connor did not want to be categorised as such a delinquent. Rose was from an upwardly mobile family but she also talked about 'chavs' who were 'really naughty people'. According to Rose, these young men could be distinguished because they wore 'tracksuit bottoms' and the young women were 'like orange, fake tan and stuff' (Rose, traditional A Levels). The popularity of the term chav has grown in recent years (Haywood and Yar 2006; Le Grand 2015; Tyler 2013) and this was reflected among the language used by the young people. What distinguishes the chav from other terms describing the underserving poor, such as the underclass, is that in addition to their morally reprehensible behaviour, they are also deviant in taste and consumption (Haywood and Yar 2006), as Rose's comments illustrate. Nayak (2006) notes that young people may not talk about class in explicit terms, but it is 'threaded through the daily fabric of their lives: it is stitched into codes of respect, accent, dress, music, body adornment and comportment' (2006: 828). While their parents may highlight their own respectability through ordinariness and critiques of parenting, the younger generation in our sample used the figure of the 'chav' to distance themselves from those who were 'rough' and morally deficient.

Surprisingly, given that at the time of the interviews was shortly after the financial crash of 2008/9, there was only one specific reference to more privileged groups as being responsible for inequality.

> If it was fair – these – all these bankers now who are getting all these one point odd billion pounds of bonuses wouldn't get it. Because why should we pay them when they've just lost us all that money? They shouldn't be getting them bonuses now they should be giving it back (Adrian, painter & decorator)

This came from Adrian, the same parent who was also the only interviewee to highlight class politics. On the basis of one example, we cannot draw any generalisations about 'class consciousness', but we can note that identifications of class disadvantage seemed to provide Adrian with a framework for recognising structural privilege. Yet in all of these discussions, we can see claims to moral hierarchies as classed, in which young people and their parents position themselves in relation to others. Thus our participants engaged in individualised positioning using classed hierarchies, even though there was only one explicit acknowledgement of collective class identities (Savage 2000). As noted by Tyler (2013), the political implications of these classifications are not whether, for example, an identifiable underclass exists. Instead, she argues that the question should be: what are the functions of such classifications? In the case of this study, how do these moralisations about the culture and value of others influence public discourse about social mobility? We suggest that the neoliberal social imaginary, which supports 'fair chances and hard work' for individual advancement, was shaping the ways that the different generations spoke about the education and employment opportunities open to contemporary youth.

Opportunities and inequalities

When considering the education and employment landscape facing their children, the parents noted different 'opportunity structures' (Roberts 2009) to their own. At least 10 of the parents had experienced the tripartite schools system, as they mentioned either passing or failing the 'eleven-plus' exam[vi]. As we explored in greater detail in a previous paper (Snee and Devine 2015), there seemed to be more jobs on offer in the past. Moreover, the decline of manufacturing, often a source of steady work, was mourned. These views were not rose-tinted: there was recognition of gender segregation and a sense of their being fewer

opportunities for mobility. In some ways, parents perceived greater choice and opportunity for their children in the present, particularly the chance to engage with education.

However, they were concerned about the current employment market for their children, including job insecurity, along with an inaccessible property ladder. They saw that wealthier parents could provide their children with advantages that were not within the reach of most. These included the gains afforded by private schooling and tuition; the rising costs of higher education; and that some schools had greater resources than others. Credential inflation was another concern, indicating that parents had a realistic and informed view of the job marketplace. Crucially, none of the parents (except one, Adrian, discussed in the previous section) spoke about being antagonised by the most privileged. Their discontent included the extra help received by the 'undeserving', along with 'bright' children:

> … sometimes I think Cameron's a bit middle of the road and I do think sometimes if your child's very clever they get noticed, if they're very naughty they get noticed and its these big chunk of people in the middle that, you know, don't they, just sort of sail through' (Deidre, Senior Nurse).

Indeed, these views reflect the growing trend within youth studies over the lack of attention paid to the 'missing middle' (Roberts and Macdonald 2013).

The tensions at work in these reflections on inequality shape the parents' evaluations of the chances for young people to 'get on'. The contradictions inherent in trying to explain such chances through contemporary meritocratic discourse are highlighted in Sarah's discussion of one of her daughter's fellow pupils who had been offered a place at Oxford:

> *Sarah*: He wasn't from high professional parents and he's just… *through hard work* […] I think it does *depend on the person* if they want to but you do need the *backing from parents* to listen to them read and doing their homework and things like that but *at the end of the day it's the child* I think so – yeah I do think some probably do struggle through *parents and background* but – looking at schools and everything I think now *everybody starts with an equal opportunity, it's what they*

make of it really and how much encouragement – it is encouragement. No it is I think it is down to *encouragement from parents* but I think education-wise –

Interviewer: Everyone's given a fair chance?

Sarah: Yeah I think they're given a fair chance. It's what help they get outside really. (Sarah, childminder)

The young people viewed education in the UK as more or less equal, as everyone has access to school. Four young people – all from middle class families – recognised the potential advantages of private education, but even this was not necessarily a barrier. The young people did worry about costs of higher education and future debt however:

> I think it's rubbish because like, they like tell us to get as many qualifications as possible but there's like people coming out of college and university and there's no jobs for them to go in, and like if they have like university loans and stuff, they can't pay them off 'cause they have no job to go to and they end up in loads of debt and stuff, which just makes stuff worse (Jade, Traditional A-Levels).

Such concerns, at the time of the interviews, did not seem insurmountable. Out of the sample of 16 young people discussed here, just two indicated they believed there were significant inequalities in the education system. Notably, these were children whose parents were from the middle class, suggesting some cultural capital in terms of knowing the 'rules of the game' (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller 2013; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Although without extended experience of the labour market, the young people could identify contemporary problems, and were aware that there were 'not enough jobs'. Yet they did not see this as inherently unfair:

> There's not a lot of jobs at the moment… Because of the recession and everything, and the good thing it that .. well like a lot – it's – you've all got an even, even chance of getting a job if you've got the right qualifications (Cameron, Vocational).

Luttrell-Rowland (2016) suggests that the recession is a way for young people to articulate inequality while retaining an overarching discourse of meritocracy. We might suggest the

individualised explanations at work in the parents' narratives are even more pronounced in their children's. Yet the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions were also apparent. Josh exemplified these tensions:

> *Interviewer:* Do you think people have an equal chance to get good jobs?
>
> *Josh*: If you get the right qualifications, yes. But if like… I don't know. No. Yeah, they do but they erm, sort of don't, potentially (Josh, Vocational)

It is not our intention to claim that young people – or their parents – should necessarily be able to articulate the complexities of the contemporary education and employment landscape off the cuff. Yet their thoughts highlight the way the neoliberal social imaginary encourages the acceptance of discourses concerning the source of material inequality, which rest on moralised and implicitly classed notions of pathological cultures (Angus, 2015; Ball, 2012). Rivzi and Lingard (2013: 13) note that the authority of the nation state requires the 'inculcation of a social imaginary that cannot conceive of how things could be otherwise', a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1998). Here we would add that the denial of class privilege in a period of growing economic inequalities is an example of how the (neoliberal) social imaginary enables the misrecognition of meritocracy, where the social position of both the dominant and dominated is 'earned' and is thus also an act of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1990).

Gender divisions were more explicitly recognised in our participant's discussions of inequality. While we have seen a decline in class politics, we have seen a rise in awareness of 'gender issues', arguably due to the influence of feminism, particularly since the 1970s (Bradley 2016). The parents were able to articulate gendered experiences of work and education in their own and also older generations. Talking about his mother, Nick reflected on the limited choices for women in the past:

> So her father didn't think it was right that she went to university which as a woman most women would think totally opposite. So she never got, she could have gone to university. She was adequately academic and everything but he wouldn't let her go you see […] But times were different then for women (Nick, Small Business Owner).

Bottero (2012) suggests when people make temporal comparisons about inequality, they often see improvements thanks to social change, but this does not mean that they cannot also see ongoing relative inequalities. Consequently, Nick wanted to ensure that his three daughters were not restricted by gender roles, and wanted them to become 'independent women'.

Gendered paths in education and employment did not explicitly feature in the young people's narratives. However, the planned trajectories of these young men and women suggested gendered patterns in their aspirations. Our young men aspired to the army; engineering; the police; creative industries; and self-employed trades such as electrician. The young women hoped for careers in nursing; teaching; law; fashion/beauty; sports therapy; and dance. While parents reflected on the greater freedoms that their daughters especially had compared to previous generations, gender norms were still operating in guiding their children's choices. Of particular concern for both mothers and daughters was the perceived restrictions of motherhood for having a career.

In an earlier article (Snee and Devine 2015) we highlighted the classed nature of family formation (Crompton 2006) in our sample, with four of our mothers getting married and/or having children while still teenagers, and all of the parents had their first child before 30. The implications of motherhood for work/life trajectories was a key issue for both generations of women. The young women themselves spoke of wanting to delay having children and rejected the label of 'housewife', seen as a relic of the past that meant that they could not live their full potential. In these narratives, the 'correct' aspiration for young women is that of the middle class norm; the pursuit of education and a career is to be prioritised over family life and children.

Their mothers also spoke of the importance of delaying having children – or indeed not having them at all:

Interviewer: What do you imagine for your kids? What do you imagine for Lucy?

> *June*: Lucy? Well I just … and I'm being totally honest now, I hope she just has a good career, maybe no children, does that surprise you? But saying I've got children – but I wouldn't again. [...] I really don't see what is out there so I'd say to her get a job and if there's opportunities to go abroad, go (June, accounts supervisor).

There is a strong sense of escape in June's account, in which she hopes for a different life for her daughter than her own and ideally, one outside the UK. Emigrating was an aspiration for both the young men and women themselves: Holly, Richard and Connor spoke of hoping to live in America in the future; Cameron imagined a better life with his own business in Australia; and Jacob and Rebecca looked ahead to simply living 'overseas'. However, the perceived limitations of having a young family – and reproducing the classed family formation of previous generations – was applied only to daughters. There is optimism in these pictures of the future, given perceptions of reduced gender inequality, but also anxiety that young women may become 'stuck'. Consequently, social mobility for young women in particular is driven by being able to 'get on' by 'getting away' (Lawler 1999).

Conclusions: fair chances and hard work?

The neoliberal social imaginary is one in which social mobility is possible for those with who work hard. It frames fairness as equality of opportunity, not outcome, and accompanies trends in class dis-identification. In this paper, we have discussed how this shapes everyday talk about inequality when parents and children reflect on young people's opportunities, looking to the past, present and future. Both generations distanced themselves from class labels, and class was an indicator of personal qualities rather than a collective identity. Unfairness within this system is about the preferential treatment of underserving others such as 'bad parents' or 'chavs'. Such labels are micro acts of symbolic violence in which class is implicit in moralised judgements, even if it is explicitly renounced (Bourdieu 1990; Skeggs 1997). This does not mean that our participants were completely unaware of inequality. The older generation acknowledged the unequal distribution of resources, and while there was more ambivalence in the young people's narratives, they were still aware of

class stigma. We also some found more explicit discussions of gender inequality, with hopes that young women would escape the restrictions of the past.

Our participants had largely accepted the dominant messages of fair chances and hard work as a 'moral imperative' (Littler 2013: 66). Yet our interviews also show how opportunities and inequalities are understood in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. France and Haddon (2014) note that such contradictions do not mean young people are 'blind' to their circumstances. Instead, these narratives highlight the problems inherent in trying to articulate transitions in an unequal system using dominant language (Luttrell-Rowland 2016). They are inconsistent precisely because justifying a hierarchical education system through appeals to fairness is, in itself, contradictory (Reay 2013: 48). Savage et al. (2015) point to the inherent problems with meritocratic politics, given the evidence for drastically widening economic inequalities and how competitive education markets mean that those with the most resources will win the 'race to the top'. Such comments are located in a wider picture of class in contemporary Britain which we see traces of in our participants' narratives: where those who are at the bottom of the class structure are stigmatised and stereotyped, while those at the top remain relatively unscrutinised; where the middle of the class structure is fragmented along the accumulation of different resources; and where these resources intersect and interplay to maximise accumulation for the already advantaged (Savage et al. 2015).

We are cautious about making claims that the parents and children in our sample constitute different 'political generations' (Grasso et al. 2017). While class dis-identification may become more entrenched among the young people, and the 'abject others' (Tyler 2013) used to establish their own respectability may be different from their parents, we also have to recognise that they have fewer life experiences to draw on to consider issues of inequality. Future work would be beneficial to conduct more analysis on classed patterns in subjectivities around inequality and social mobility than we have available in our data – for example, is positional competition understood differently by different class fractions (Brown

2013)? Moreover, space here has not allowed a discussion of how 'race' and ethnicity intersect with classed and gendered discourses around fairness. We find the concept of the 'social imaginary' useful because it allows an understanding of how people not only view the world around them, but also *what they consider to be possible in the future*. The fact that the concepts of meritocracy and social mobility, rather than solidarity and shared goals, seem so entrenched among our participants indicate a political need to promote alternative imaginaries that are instead concerned with social justice (Angus 2015). Critical sociology undoubtedly has a role to play here, but the challenge is to then to inform greater public debate around the dominant understandings of social mobility and question the legitimacy of a system in which the odds are always stacked.

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Notes

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ii Including White Irish and White Other.

iii The young people's pathways were characterised as whether they were taking 'traditional' A Levels (if they chose at least one of the 'facilitating subjects' as defined by the Russell Group (2012); as 'new' A Levels if they were not taking any of the facilitating subjects; and vocational/other if they had chosen courses that were not A Levels or indeed were not in education the following year.

iv See Snee and Devine (2015) for a detailed discussion of social resources in 'taking the next step'.

v The 'chav' is 'a widely circulated stereotype typically constructed around young White British people dressed in streetwear clothing and jewellery' (Le Grand 2015: 5.1).

vi These exams at the end of primary schooling determined whether pupils entered a grammar school (with the best opportunities and the chance to take academic exams), secondary modern (for those intended for vocational routes or routine labour) or technical schools (a less common path focused on industry).

Table 1: The Final Sample of Interviewees: Young People and Parents

Young person	**Young person's route**	**Parent(s)**	**Parent occupation**
Richard Blake	Traditional A Levels	Adam Blake Sarah Blake	Partner in accounting firm Childminder
Lucy Grey	Traditional A Levels	June Grey	Accounts supervisor
Emily King	Traditional A Levels	Nick King Julie King	Owns small business Full time parent
Jade Maxwell *	Traditional A Levels	Tanya Maxwell	Project Officer
Rose Maxwell*	Traditional A Levels	Tanya Maxwell	Project Officer
Joe Shaw	Traditional A Levels	Kathy Shaw	Optician
Jacob Wills	Traditional A Levels	Mary Wills	Former nurse
Tony Edwards	New A Levels	Elaine Goodwin	Postal worker
Amanda Wynn	New A Levels	Lois Wynn	Housing officer
Sadie Wood	New A Levels	Heather Wood	Primary school teacher
Josh Adams	Vocational/other	Hannah Adams	Cleaner
Aaron Croft	Vocational/other	Jane Lewis	Not employed (ill health)
Cameron Hayes	Vocational/other	Noel Hayes Deidre Hayes	Teaching assistant Senior nurse
Rebecca Jenkins	Vocational/other	Aileen Jenkins Adrian Jenkins	Carer Painter and decorator
Connor Roberts	Vocational/other	Jill Richards (carer) **	(Mother: not employed)
Holly Tomlinson	Vocational/other	Clare Tomlinson	Call centre worker

* Jade and Rose were twin sisters.

** Connor lived in a children's home although he saw his mother nearly every day. Advice suggested that it was best to interview his main carer in the children's home.

Table 2: Parents' backgrounds, trajectories and social class categories

Parent / Carer	Background	Education and training	Occupation
Working class *			
Hannah Adams	M: Factory worker F: Factory worker	Left school at 16 with no qualifications	Cleaner
Elaine Goodwin	M: Nurse F: Small business owner	Started A Levels but then left for YTS Retail Scheme	Postal worker
Aileen Jenkins	M: Home help F: Painter and decorator	Left school at 16 NVQ 3 in Health & Social Care	Carer
Jane Lewis **	M: Shopkeeper F: Welder	Left School at 16 with 2 CSEs	Not employed
Jill Richards	M: Full-time parent F: Manufacturing worker	Left school at 15½. National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB)	Carer
Intermediate class *			
Sarah Blake	M: Full-time parent F: Building contractor	Left school at 16 with CSEs.	Childminder
June Grey	M: Retail worker F: Electrician	Left school at 17 – gave up place at nursing college	Accounts supervisor
Nick King	M: Bank clerk F: Mechanic	Retook O Levels at 6th form. Commercial apprenticeship at engineering firm. HND at night school	Small business owner
Julie King **	M: Shopkeeper F: Coalman	Catering management course.	Full-time parent
Noel Hayes	M: Office manager F: Teacher	Left school at 16 with O Levels. Started hotel catering management course but did not complete	Teaching assistant
Adrian Jenkins	M: Legal Exec F: Pipe layer	Left school at 16. Apprenticeship as refrigeration technician.	Painter and decorator
Clare Tomlinson	M: Worked in insurance office F: Small business owner	Secretarial college	Call centre worker
Middle class *			
Adam Blake	M: Bookkeeper F: Teacher	Left school at 16. Professional accountancy qualifications at night school.	Partner in accounting firm

Deidre Hayes	M: Shopkeeper F: (No data)	Started A Levels but left when pregnant. Nurses' training. Degree in nursing education.	Senior Nurse
Tanya Maxwell	M: Full-time parent F: Sheet metal worker	Left school at 16. Banking qualifications	Project Officer
Kathy Shaw	M: Secretary F: Plumber	A Levels. On the job training as optician.	Optician
Mary Wills	M: Nurse F: Welder	Started A Levels but did not complete. Nurses' training	Former nurse
Lois Wynn	M: Cleaner F: Tiler	BTEC Mechanics. Started apprenticeship.	Housing Officer
Heather Wood	M: Hairdresser F: Engineer	Left school at 16. Studied to teach sports development while working.	Primary school teacher

* Parents were organised into class categories based on their occupation.

** Based on previous employment history